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*RUPERT BROOKE'S
DEATH AND BURIAL*



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RUPERT BROOKE'S DEATH AND BURIAL
*Based on the Log of the French Hospital Ship DUGUAY-
TROUIN; Translated from the French of J. Perdriel-
Vaissières by Vincent O'Sullivan*



“Proud, then, clear-eyed and laughing,
Go to greet Death as a friend.”

RUPERT BROOKE

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April twenty-second, 1915.

IN the roadstead of Trebouki: This is the first halt on the expedition to the East. After the noisy coaling-station of Alexandria, we have now before our eyes the starkness of a marble island. Lying about us are the *Savoie*, the *Ville-de-Carthage*, the *Vinh-Long*, which form the first line of bearing of the French expeditionary force; and also the battleships *Canopus*, *Prince George* and *Prince Edward*, the advance line of the supporting squadron of the British.

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We have not heard artillery since we were in the North Sea amid the roaring of the battle of the Yser. Here the vividness of the mild April morning, the light like a scarf about the hill-tops, the bay like an enclosed lake—all breathe peace.

A cutter puts off from the *Prince George*; it comes toward us and draws alongside. They have brought on a stretcher a man who is ill of some malady, for there are no wounded here yet.

It is a lieutenant on General Hamilton's staff. His face is bloodless; he gazes with large blue eyes which have still a good deal of life in them; he has an eruption on the lip. An officer, a friend of his, tall and fair, with the air of an English gentleman, is by his side. This is Lieutenant Asquith, son of the Prime Minister.

Here, in a little white cabin in the round-house, the whole medical staff is mobilised for the single patient. But is it not too late?

Wireless messages come in: "What is the news?" General Hamilton and Mr. Winston Churchill are worrying; all England is interested in the condition of this young man. He is worse; the dreadful poison is doing its work. How did the accident—this appalling and stupid accident—happen?

It was yesterday. He had gone ashore on the marble island where scarcely anything grows but sweet-smelling shrubs. He makes his way through the holly-bushes, the sage-brush and balsam and storax, following a mysterious clue which he takes to be the thread of his loftiest dreams, and which is without doubt the thread of his fate—terrible black thread—the last thread. He comes to that glade

you may see on the far side where there is a little water, some olive trees, a silvery corner where the breeze trembles. Here the poet rests. Then—Oh, yes, indeed, it was the ultimate dream!—then a little grey fly, quite unnoticeable (here in the Orient within a month we shall have patches of flies everywhere), the tiny fly stung him just near the lip. A fly? A bee out of the darkness attracted by the honey of words. Rupert Brooke has a malignant ulcer.

The wireless is inquiring again. Reply: He is worse.

Does he still see this white cabin where they are trying rather hopelessly to neutralize the poison? Is he still aware of the taste of sunlight, of salt, the balsam taste of the islands which the soft breeze carries to him through the open port?

Still, full light sustains the blue tent of sky at the zenith, but upon him night has already fallen—night upon that eminent head, night upon *that* brain! . . . Rupert Brooke has become unconscious.

April twenty-third.

IT is just 4.46 in the afternoon. A quartermaster knocks at the Captain's door. With his hand at the salute he says quite calmly,—for out there in Flanders last winter he got used to delivering such messages:

“Captain, the English lieutenant is dead.”

For him, you see, it is a man like another. And we live in times when the death of a man is a very small matter.

Never did face seem paler on the bed of death. Is it because of that black mark on the lip? Or is it that the Eastern light beats more pitilessly on the skin of this man

from the North? Everybody is silent. Then a voice says:
 "England has lost her greatest poet."

Orders come in while the coffin is being prepared. We are to sail tonight. The hour draws near for a demonstration in force against the straits. We must hurry. Come on; close down the coffin.

O pale, pale, English face that no one will look on ever again! Face of passion, of dreams, and of torment! Poetry not of the world, but of beyond the world, dwelling so early on *the other side*.

"Do they still whisper, the old weary cries,
 Mid youth and song, feasting and carnival,
 Through laughter, through the roses, as of old,
 Comes Death, on shadowy and relentless feet,
 Death, unappeasable by prayer or gold;
 Death is the end, the end!"

The coffin is placed on the poop and covered with the English flag. Sixteen palms decorate this improvised chapel. The officers of the *Duguay-Trouin* lay on the coffin a bunch of flowers, the best they could get—wild flowers stolen from the bees of the island and tied with the French colours.

At the foot of the coffin stands a sailor presenting arms. Lieutenant Asquith, who has not left his friend for a moment, is at the side of the bier with some other English officers.

A brief twilight. The night falls.

From the *Canopus* the English commander signals: "Make haste." As there is no time to engrave a brass plate, the Lieutenant asks for a cauterizing iron. Then by the light of the lamps, which are like a wreath of

watchlights, he sears on the oak plank itself these letters:

RUPERT BROOKE

A sharp whistle is heard: "All hands on deck." The ship's company lines up with bared heads to pay the last honours.

A launch takes the boat which carries the coffin in tow. Other boats put off from the warships.

There are many of them, and they glide over the water like a holiday procession, like those gigs which set off at evening from the ships of the Mediterranean squadron to go to the Corso. Towards what Cythera are cadenced all these oars? Music sounds as they pass; the huge ships one after another send them gusts of harmony, but the airs are solemn and low. The night is soft with a sheen of moon, bestarred. The perfume of the isle drifts through the night, becoming stronger and stronger. The boats in line steer towards a little cove. A hue like pearl floats on the water.

At the landing place several English officers are waiting and a guard of honour. Twelve Australian giants, splendid-looking men in service uniforms, come forward. They wear broad-brimmed felt hats, cartridge belts, and fastened round their waists are the cords which will be used to lower the coffin into the grave.

The chaplain has slipped a surplice over his uniform.

Here is a gently sloping valley. It is hard to tell whether there have ever been paths: if so, they have left no trace. The ground is marble; underneath these loose oxidized stones are royal foundations—pillars or statues ready to spring forth from the gleaming hillside. Accordingly

the vegetation is sparse—brushwood, little holly-bushes shadowy like ghosts. The Australians make slow headway. A meagre light is shed about them by lanterns and torches which illumine one step and leave the next in darkness. Sometimes they slip, half stumble, and can not help jolting their burden. The marble pebbles turn under their feet. The brambles hide pitfalls. Their heavy laced boots press the aromatic shrubs. A bewitching odour, a mingling of pepper and musk, rises like incense. The wan moonlight lingers on the end of the procession where the torches flicker no more. Their flames trail away in ruddy and smoky tresses which the night hastens to cover with her silverine purity.

Not a village, not a house, not a road. We keep on marching—two miles perhaps. Here is the place!

Silence.

Some olive trees in a more fertile hollow; the breeze is half asleep between their leaves. At their foot a grave has been dug.

“If I should die think only this of me:
That there’s some corner of a foreign field
That is for ever England.”

O conquering heart! Through what malign fate art thou given pause in this place on the eve of battle, before the sacramental spilling of thy blood? True Englishman, strong in pride, who came hither, as in old days Achilles when he hid at the court of Lycomedes, to await a glorious and violent taking off—Rupert Brooke, who carried within thee a homesickness for immortality, “sets thy star, O heart, forever?”

The grave is opened at this very place where doubtless thy last poem—the final poem too beautiful to be written—sang in harmony with the high-pulsed rhythm of thy blood. Lieutenant Asquith comes forward: he thinks the grave is too small. Who shall know the measure of a great man? He goes down into the grave and takes the lugubrious spade himself, and with only the aid of another officer digs the ground, like a brother unwilling to leave to anyone else the last pieties for him he loved.

The chaplain has ended his prayer. An order is given. Three volleys roll through the mountains, rending the air with abrupt claps which are tossed from one elevation to another, echoing. Thereupon the silent night becomes mysteriously alive. The owls cry out, scared, and little bells, any number of little bells, tinkle all around. They come from the drowsy flocks which are frightened, from the sheep and goats suddenly awakened in terror and rushing away headlong through the sweet-scented brushwood. It is the passing-bell for Orpheus on the necks of innocent and untamed animals, whose invisible bells sweep lightly over the invisible bushes.

And then it is silence again; and it shall always be silence.

Tomorrow the ships will weigh anchor. After just touching at Moudros and Tenedos they will engage in the heroic enterprise of the Dardanelles, and for many a day those who followed the poet to the grave will hardly have time to recall under a deluge of fire the lonely mound lost in solitary Scyros. Nevertheless

“There shall be

In that rich earth a richer dust concealed:

A dust whom England bore, shaped, made aware,
 Gave once her flowers to love, her ways to roam,
 A body of England's, breathing English air,
 Washed by rivers, blest by suns of home."

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How can we help picturing the Muse with silken curls seated in that little dell, her feet resting on the marble soil of the island, her elbow on her knee, her chin held in the palm of her fragile hand—the pale and spiritual Muse of England.

She is watchful and she meditates. This is not the first time she has known the Grecian land; she has already bent over another genius there. It will soon be a hundred years since Byron died of cholera at Missolonghi. Flaming with Romanticism in action, he had come to pluck Greece in her agony from the throttling hand of the oppressor. Today it is once more against the Turk we must do battle, and behind the Turk a redoubtable and prepared Barbarism—the modern onrush of Attila.

To Brooke, as to Byron, the poet's laurel seemed a slight thing, thought alone unsatisfying. What he needed was the khaki uniform and a revolver at his belt, which alas! he never had a chance to fire off.

And so the Muse lingers there, for it is a propitiatory altar. Here lies the first Englishman fallen by the roadside, the chosen victim, the hostage offered to malevolent fate, the libation.

She watches; she waits. Mornings will follow in the odorous deserted place, the sun will shift the strip of shade cast by the small olive trees, winter storms will

beat about the island, and it will be by rare chance that some goatherd clad in skins climbs the hill and passes there, or some fisherman in whose basket gleams the silver-bellied fish.

The Muse watches, and the obscure colloquy in which she is absorbed alters her immemorial presence little by little.

When the great war is over, those who go to seek the cherished ashes of the poet will see arise beneath the olive trees of Scyros a glorious countenance they have not yet seen. Liberty sprang from Byron's grave; O Rupert Brooke, look forth with us and see Victory arise from thine!

THE END

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